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BUREAU OF
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CURRENT
ANALYSES

(U) CHINA: EDUCATIONAL REFORM STIRS CONTROVERSY

~~(S)~~ Summary

China's educational establishment is in the middle of a highly complex and bitter debate over the function of education and how to reform the academic system. The stakes involved are high, including money, power, issues of policy and educational philosophy, generational differences, and regional conflict. At the heart of the debate appears to be the attempt to apply to education the reform measures now being used in the economy and in research and development, including variants of the "responsibility system," the "commercialization" of knowledge, and greater decentralization.

Despite the highly charged debate, available evidence suggests that reformers will press ahead with many of these measures much as they did in the science and technology sector earlier this year. The educational reform document is now expected to be released sometime this summer. Big winners from the reforms are likely to include major universities--especially those with strong technical and engineering departments--and university administrators and faculties. Among the major losers will be the Ministry of Education and possibly small liberal arts and teaching colleges.

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~~(S/NP/NC/OC)~~ Educational Reform Document Stalled

Educational reform has always been a highly controversial and politically charged topic in China. The educational establishment was a favorite focus of Mao Zedong's scorn and ire during the 1960s; attempts to reestablish a viable educational system have been high on Deng Xiaoping's agenda

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for more than a decade.

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~~(C/NF)~~ Debate Over the Role of Education

One major issue is the role of education under the Four Modernizations. The draft reform plan signals a shift in priorities from basic education to vocational training, according to recently available information. Fewer students would be admitted to upper-level middle school, especially in the countryside, but a much higher percentage of those who graduate from upper middle school would go on to college.

Apparently a major issue of debate has been the role of education in the countryside. In the short term, many peasants have taken the view that not much education is necessary in order to make money. Some in the educational hierarchy, too, have questioned the value of middle school education for farmers. This has led some Chinese officials to oppose the inclusion of provisions for mandatory education in the forthcoming education law, but the majority position seems to be that education will become increasingly important as farmers diversify into other fields and begin to apply modern techniques to farming. As a result, according to one source with access to this sort of information, a provision will be included in the reform plan and the educational law for nine years of mandatory schooling.

~~(C/NF)~~ Decentralization

Decentralization is another major issue of debate. The reform document would enshrine a "responsibility system" in which university presidents and faculty would have much more authority over budgetary, personnel, and curriculum decisions.

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Only presidents of some 38 key universities would be appointed by the State Council under the plan, with others being appointed by lower-level authorities. In some schools, faculty committees would elect vice presidents, and university presidents would have the power to appoint school deans. At least one reform advocate, Professor Qian Weichang, is calling for the abolition of the national entrance examination. In his opinion, the examination system is too rigid, resulting in many talented students failing to gain admission. Qian advocates decentralization to the province of responsibility for administering entrance examinations.

Some critics of current reform proposals, however, reportedly feel that greater university autonomy will exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, already serious problems of duplication of effort, overspecialization, and waste of resources.

~~(C/NF)~~ Funding of Education

These decentralization measures are closely linked with proposals for changing funding patterns for higher education. The Ministry of Education (MOE) role would be drastically curtailed. MOE would directly fund only 38 key universities. The remainder of China's more than 900 institutions of higher education would have to seek funding from provincial and local governments and from ministries or major enterprises. MOE would be responsible, however, for setting general educational policy, recommending to the State Council names for major appointments, and assuring such interagency coordination as the formation of the national educational budget.

Mechanisms for paying student fees also would be changed. In the past, all students were supported by the government. Under the reform plan, there would be three types of students. Some, especially those studying socially useful fields of limited marketability, would continue to be funded by the state. They would likely include primary and secondary school teachers, medical personnel, and specialists in some technical fields, such as geology and meteorology. These students would continue to be assigned jobs by the state.

Two new kinds of students would appear, however. Some students would be funded under contract by factories, corporations, research institutes, or other corporate sponsors. Their course of study would be largely determined by their sponsor, and they would be reassigned to the sponsoring unit upon completion of their studies. The reform document also reportedly calls for privately funded students. They would select their own programs of study and find their own employment after graduation.

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Funding also is changing the face of education at lower levels, especially in the countryside. The decline of collectives and communes has shrunk the funding base for rural primary and secondary education. When combined with the short-term pattern of peasants withdrawing their children from school to maximize earnings, rural education has fallen on hard times. The reform document reportedly addresses this problem in two ways. First, it mandates nine years of compulsory education, forcing local governments to find means to fund it. Second, it includes measures for self-financed education or partial payment of tuition.

Paradoxically, one casualty of educational reform may be the concept of elite "key schools," at least at the primary and secondary levels. According to a recent China Daily article, some educators feel the attention and resources lavished on key schools in recent years have led to neglect of the majority. The argument appears to be that, in the process of modernization, vast numbers of educated technicians will be necessary, and the concentration of resources on key schools is impeding their development. No plans for the abolition of key universities, however, seem to be in the works. On the contrary, the Ministry of Education will apparently devote more attention to their development.

~~(S/NF)~~ Control Over University Personnel Matters

Personnel matters are another controversial issue. The reform document is said to call for greater mobility for educational personnel and will attempt to raise their prestige, pay, and perquisites. A promising beginning in this direction took place on January 1, when primary and secondary school teachers received a raise. Despite the raise, ambitious youth see teaching careers generally as dead-end jobs, and teacher training colleges are having difficulties recruiting high-quality candidates.

A major stumbling block to releasing the reform document has allegedly been the attempt to do away with lifetime employment. University teachers, especially those in their forties and early fifties, are afraid that their inability to undertake research during the Cultural Revolution has put them behind both their younger and older colleagues; they fear losing out in the competitive atmosphere encouraged by the reformers.

~~(S/NF/NE/OC)~~ Educational Philosophy: The "Jiaotong Model" Controversy

The final major issue of debate is one of basic educational philosophy: Should the role of higher education continue to be

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limited to teaching and research or should it be expanded to include business? At the heart of the issue is the propagation of the "Jiaotong model." Shanghai's Jiaotong University is one of China's premier science and engineering universities. Since 1979, with the encouragement of such high-level figures as Deng Xiaoping, Wan Li, and Wang Zhen, Jiaotong has incorporated a responsibility system of defined duties, measures for greater staff mobility, increased autonomy from the Ministry of Education and, most controversial, encouragement of outside contract work.

Some educators, however, see the Jiaotong model as setting a dangerous precedent. Jiaotong's position as a major center for science and engineering favors it in competition for outside consulting contracts. Not all universities have such advantages; liberal arts and teaching colleges, in particular, will be hard pressed to follow Jiaotong's example.

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